



The Greatest

Obstacle

We Face

*The agreement between teacher and students to
exhibit a facade of orderly purposefulness is a
Conspiracy for the Least, the least hassle for anyone.*

Ted Sizer, Horace's Compromise

The desire for any new vision of teaching and learning is bound to run into the apparently immutable facts of life in our schools and communities. Passionate teaching, however enticing, can seem unreasonable in the face of the daily realities of school life. It can sound like pie-in-the-sky or head-in-the-clouds stuff. It's as if I'm not talking about real schools, that real teachers work in, with the thousand-and-one obstacles to good teaching and learning that are every teacher's lot in life.

Let us examine some of these obstacles, put them out on the table, and see if there is any underlying theme or quality about them that, once recognized, allows us to diminish some of their awful impact on our work with students. Where do teachers hit the wall in their struggle to become or to remain enthusiastic about their profession? Who or what is undermining our passions and our ideals?

- ✦ Authoritarian administrators who try to run classrooms from the main office?
- ✦ Disruptive students who spoil learning for others and make teachers act like police?
- ✦ Cynical colleagues who always find a reason to kill a worthwhile idea?
- ✦ Parents who seem not to care about what kids learn at school or at home?
- ✦ Students who come to class unprepared, unmotivated, unwilling to work?
- ✦ Class sizes that are too large to allow for personal instruction?
- ✦ Lack of adequate staffing and specialists, which requires teachers to do other people's work at the expense of their own?
- ✦ Standardized tests that determine who succeeds and who fails, without regard for individual differences or learning styles?
- ✦ Outmoded, unattractive, or unsafe school buildings and a lack of sufficient texts, materials, or technology?
- ✦ Outdated curricula, inadequate time for planning, a school schedule that carves up the day into forty-five-minute spasms of instruction?

We cannot minimize the impact of these afflictions on good teaching and learning. Far too many teachers suffer daily frustration and hardship from them. In poorly funded school districts, and in many of our neighborhoods, the lack of basic staffing and supplies and the appalling host of societal problems that wind up on a teacher's doorstep are much too serious to overlook in any discussion about improving teaching and learning. Even in affluent communities, teachers experienced many of these obstacles.

But yet another obstacle, often missed and rarely articulated is, in its way, actually more destructive. It hangs around in the background; it's a mood, a mindset that makes the other problems and obstacles we've listed even more difficult than they already are. This obstacle occurs whenever *nobody cares what's going on intellectually in the classroom or the school*, when the idea of learning is treated as a mindless duty—something to “get through any way you can.” It's what I call having to play “The Game of School.”

Here's how it starts. Or, rather, here's how soon it starts:

A friend of mine, in her early twenties, got her B. A. last year with a secondary teaching certificate in English. She is living in New York City and, after trying for a while to find a teaching position in her field, has taken a job that she very much enjoys in an after-school program for primary-school kids, located in a multi-ethnic West Side neighborhood. The program is run by the YMCA but operates out of the same public elementary school that most of the kids attend during the day.

“We have a homework hour every evening, from five to six o'clock. Wednesday is usually our night for Reading home-

work. The kids have a story or chapter to read—it's in a really good anthology that includes *Winnie the Pooh*, *Stuart Little*, *Mouse House*, as well as some traditional tales and poetry—and then they're supposed to write out one question on a special question form and hand it in to their teacher the next day.

But the kids have become so adept at figuring out what they're supposed to do that on Wednesdays they get into groups and pick the best reader among them to begin reading the story aloud (even though most of them are quite capable of reading on their own). The process usually stops after the reader has finished the first page or so, at which time the kids go off and write down their questions.

What's weird is that they seem to pick the dumbest things to ask about, questions I'm sure they don't even want to know the answers to, like "How did Pooh know Eeyore's tail was missing?" or "Why doesn't the Country Mouse like city food?"

They're clever enough to pick questions they think won't be answered somewhere later on in the story (so their teacher won't know that they only got through the first page). They also check with each other to make sure their questions are all a bit different, because they're aware their teacher knows that these kids are in the same after-school program. And having written down their questions and checked them out to avoid the appearance of collusion, they stop reading and go off and do other things.

The contrast is so amazing between how they respond to these homework assignments and how they react when I read to them. *Then* they're full of questions—real questions, like "How old is Pooh, and why doesn't *he* have to go to school like we do?" or "Why is Eeyore so sad, when he's got friends like Pooh and Piglet?" And they're always making

connections between the stories and their lives, saying things like "The Country Mouse is dumb! I *hate* the country! The city has got everything. The only thing I don't like about living in the city is the cockroaches." All this convinces me that they do, in fact, take the stories seriously.

It's as though by the middle of first grade they've already figured out that school—or at least homework—is a trick, something to learn how to get around. It's not as though they've got some horrible teacher who forces them to do tons of busy-work. She's trying to do it right, asking them to invent questions of their own instead of answering the ones at the end of the chapter."

A game is both a microcosm and a parody of life. It is like life: it brings forth the same energies and the same feelings, but, in the end, it is not *real*. It is a charade of something real. We may be absorbed by it and be willing to play along. But a voice within us is there to say, "Take it easy. It doesn't really matter. *It's only a game.*"

The particular offense of playing the Game of School lies in the disengagement of our intellect and our feelings from tasks that deserve to be taken seriously: tasks like writing, reading, thinking, planning, listening, researching, analyzing, performing, applying, evaluating. We do harm when we reduce these acts of intellect, creativity, and judgment to rote exercises, perfunctory deeds, or meaningless gestures. Faced with the stresses of daily life in school, it can seem easier, at times, to *pretend* to believe rather than to *truly believe* in the value of what we are about. Despite the positive aspects of going to school that many children and adults experience, the temptation is always there to cope with school by going through the motions.

I focus on the game because the impact of the other obsta-

cles on that list could be significantly lessened, even overcome, if students and teachers were united as allies in a struggle against ignorance, oppression, and poverty of the spirit. What prevents people in schools from joining together to rescue learning from at least some of these obstacles is that too many of us are caught up in the game.

The way our schools do business unknowingly makes it easy for students and teachers to play the game, by loading us up with things to do that help everybody avoid confronting issues about meaning and motivation and choice in our work. By their own account, teachers spend far too much class time taking the roll, giving directions, assigning homework, checking homework, monitoring seat work, giving quizzes and tests, marking those tests, giving grades, and, more than anything else, talking their way through textbook chapters and lesson plans that may have precious little to do with what excites anybody in the class. It's what Martin Haberman calls "The Pedagogy of Poverty . . . certain ritualistic acts that, much like the ceremonies performed by religious functionaries, have come to be conducted for their intrinsic value rather than to foster learning."

Lest we be tempted to see crusty administrators, uncooperative students, or super-cynical teachers as the only players in the Game of School, let me say that *almost every single student* I have talked with *admits to playing it almost all of the time*. And most teachers also grudgingly admit to playing it during some part of every school day. We're all players:

- ✱ "A" students who are ready to do anything asked of them to earn that A except take risks, share their true feelings, or think for themselves;
- ✱ "B" students who believe that writing down a bunch of

platitudes in neat, regulation-style paragraphs and handing them in on time is a substitute for pursuing a topic with critical imagination;

- ✱ "C" students who are interested in keeping out of trouble academically but do only as much work as they need to in order to get by;
- ✱ Anybody who gives or accepts a grade of D, an acknowledgment that the student doesn't know enough of the material to amount to anything but has somehow convinced the teacher that he or she doesn't deserve to be flunked;
- ✱ Any student who opts not to ask a question or disagree with someone else's ideas, so as not to give the impression that he or she really cares about what's going on;
- ✱ Teachers who cover the curriculum without stopping to ask if it even makes sense to kids and who give short-answer tests because it is too time-consuming to grade essay-type questions;
- ✱ Teachers who base more than a total of 15 to 20 percent of a student's grade on short-answer recall, or on obedience to deadlines, thus restricting the percentage that students earn for acquiring and demonstrating essential skills and knowledge;
- ✱ Teachers, parents, and administrators who try not to frustrate students by asking more of them than their "innate potential" warrants;
- ✱ Administrators who are content when students are quiet, when litter, graffiti, and fighting are reduced, and when nobody throws food in the lunchroom, regardless of how much students are actually learning;
- ✱ Administrators who spend more time making sure that

teachers have filled in their lesson plans than visiting classes to see these lessons taking place;

- ✦ Guidance counselors who schedule poor or minority kids into low-level courses because they think the kids probably won't be going to college, and because their parents are unlikely to complain;
- ✦ Parents who complain about the grades their kids are getting but who don't try to find out what their kids' teachers are expecting them to learn;
- ✦ Parents who push their children into courses or activities because "it'll look good on your transcript for college," whether or not the children are interested.

We can think of a host of other players waiting on the bench. Waiting, in fact, is a major part of playing the Game of School: waiting for someone else to answer the question; waiting for someone else to take the initiative; waiting for the bell to ring; waiting for the day to end; waiting to graduate; waiting to retire.

We're not talking about bad students or bad teachers—people who are mean, insulting, or vengeful, or who cheat, lie, or commit acts of violence or vandalism. The types of students, teachers, parents, administrators listed here—virtually all of us at some time in our academic careers—are not criminals or miscreants. We have merely made a personal decision or accepted the common view of our peers that there is little intrinsic value in learning in this course, this class, this school or college program, and moreover, that we don't intend to do anything about it. We act as though getting along, getting by, and getting out is what school really is about.

We Pretend to Teach Them—and They Pretend to Learn

"Hey, we're all stuck in here together," the teacher explains to his ninth-grade general math class. "Let's try to be reasonable

with each other and we'll get along fine. Just obey the rules, come to class prepared, hand things in when they're due, and you're guaranteed a passing grade."

What student hasn't been offered this deal from one or more teachers? Who hasn't felt grateful to some teacher for not acting as though what he or she was doing was so terribly important that we'd all have to make believe we were interested, just so the teacher wouldn't be offended?

When the Game of School is played frequently enough, and by enough people, the game *becomes* school. The artificial and superficial replaces what's authentic and purposeful in a lesson or curriculum. The pursuit of learning turns into the avoidance of conflict or extra work. A powerful feeling of uneasiness takes over. Passion, idealism, self-respect, the search for knowledge, and the pursuit of excellence give way to a pervasive, mind- and spirit-numbing mediocrity. We go along to get along.

Under their former Communist system where money was almost without value (there was nothing worthwhile to buy) and production was without quality (the only standard set was a numerical quota to be filled, however shoddily), Polish workers used to say, "We pretend to work, and they pretend to pay us." Where school is a game, students act as if to say, "We pretend to learn, and they pretend to teach us." And some teachers actually do say, "Hey, I get my paycheck whether you kids learn anything or not."

In those places where the game has become school, there is little competition based on true quality, little accountability based on real performance. You get good grades or advancement by adhering to the rules, by being obedient to those in control. Quality is incidental: some teachers continue to demand it, some students continue to strive for it, but the system mostly expects and rewards perfunctory compliance. Too

many students get their diplomas by being there, by putting up with it all, by serving their time. Too many teachers spend their time controlling the noise, covering the syllabus, and getting grades in on time.

In the unspoken canons of the Game of School, real excellence may be an embarrassment. The truly outstanding teacher is honored by being patronized: "She's so great with kids! I wish I had a hundred more like her"; or avoided as a threat to colleagues: "Take it easy! You're making the rest of us look bad"; shunned as an odd-ball: "There he goes: the Mad Scientist of Central High." The outstanding student may also be ostracized by peers: "She's a real brain. I would never want to be *that* smart." A member of the football team whispers to a teammate in class: "Put your hand down! What are you trying to do—make us other guys look stupid?"

Few schools have a system that allows them to profit from excellence or to sanction mediocrity. We don't seem to be able to say: "He's so great with kids. Let's learn what he does well and see how more of us can do it, too," or "Students always complain that your classes are boring. What plans do you have to change that?" We so rarely ask our students: "Tell us what has to happen around here in order for you to be willing to study hard, think deeply, and take real pride in your work?" Teachers who do the minimum get the same salary increases and seniority rights as those who knock themselves out for their students. Students who do the minimum, or less than minimum, get promoted along with everyone else.

Whenever and wherever the game prospers, passionate teaching subsides and intense and purposeful learning diminishes. It can happen to the best of people, in the best of schools. In a lot of schools, it happens to almost everybody almost all the time.

In citing it as such an obstacle to good teaching and learning, I am not expecting some educational utopia where learners and their mentors float along on clouds of diligence and good will, where honesty, integrity, and mutual respect stream from the intercom and everyone sings a chorus of "learning for learning's sake." I won't deny that part of my case for passionate teaching and against the game stems from a kind of idealism, and from the fact that I am the parent of two public-school students and am now teaching experienced educators who are preparing themselves for new roles in educational leadership. And I won't pretend that conditions in most schools favor a renaissance of passionate teaching and engaged learning. Anyone who wants to be cynical about the prospects of substantive improvement in teaching and learning in American classrooms can find plenty of evidence to support the bleakest views.

Pictures from the Gallery of School

But allow me to paint another picture and offer an exhibition of images that come from every school, along with scrapbooks from the past and examples of learning from around the home and community. My gallery includes:

- ✦ Creative and careful school work that some students seem able to produce almost all the time and that most kids can do when they put their minds to it;
- ✦ Videotapes of rehearsals for school plays and concerts, and practice sessions for sports teams, with coaches helping students get ready to perform before live audiences; activities where pride, teamwork, and excellence are unself-consciously championed;
- ✦ Notes from student/teacher conferences where, away

from the noise and glare of the classroom, they talk together about what the teacher's standards mean and how the student's strengths and weaknesses can be addressed;

- ✦ Photo albums of parents and kids working on their hobbies together: building a tree house, planting a garden, redecorating a room, or mastering the skills of the family sewing machine or table saw;
- ✦ Sketches from the best of one-room schoolhouses, where mutual respect was assumed, where older children taught younger children, and where pupils worked in small groups or alone while the teacher moved around, helping them stay focused on where each of them (not the class as a whole) was headed;
- ✦ Records from teacher cluster-team meetings, where four or five teachers who share the same eighty to one hundred students meet daily to plan interdisciplinary curricula, establish consistent standards, review student progress, confer with parents, and support one another in their work to promote learning for all;
- ✦ Exhibits from science fairs, inventors' conventions, art shows, young authors' events, where the individuality and creativity of students are celebrated (the very same characteristics they might suppress in the classroom);
- ✦ Scrapbooks from student/teacher advisory groups, where fifteen kids meet regularly with an adult (teacher, principal, librarian, guidance person, nurse) to talk informally about school issues, personal concerns, career goals;
- ✦ Snatches from an informal class debate, where students involved in a controversial topic have temporarily forgotten that it's not cool to show you care about ideas;

- ✦ Testimony about kids who volunteer in hospitals, as Little League coaches, Sunday School teachers, in day-care centers, on charity drives, or political campaigns;
- ✦ Dossiers from apprenticeship programs, where students work with adult masters, absorbing from them both the content and the ethos of what it takes to do a job well;
- ✦ Home videos of students working hard at their hobbies (computers, crafts, athletics and fitness, animal care, music, and dance), where connections between the what and the why of learning are obvious and unquestionable.

There are certainly counter-arguments to these images: there were plenty of lousy one-room schoolhouses; some student hobbies have little educational value; lots of teacher/student conferences are perfunctory. Voluntary pursuits and associations—teams, plays, fairs, family projects, hobbies, and the like—more easily inspire student interest than required classroom activities. And any normal teacher who tried to foster individualized learning for 125 students and five classes a day would be an intellectual and emotional basket-case by Thanksgiving. The reason so many teachers feel compelled to “cover the curriculum” is that the system won’t pay for small classes and the more personalized instruction that small classes would permit.

Why do we play the Game of School? Many will argue that it’s the only game most of us—students as well as teachers—can afford to play, under the conditions of compulsory education: under-funded, undermined, overwhelmed.

But is it? Just how much of what students and teachers do in school is compulsory? What factors are indisputably beyond our influence or control? Aside from taking the roll, keeping reasonable order, relating in some way to the curriculum, and

coaching students in taking standardized tests, can't teachers do pretty much what they think makes sense in most of their classes? Aren't there a lot more options open to us than we are in the habit of exercising? In the most depressed city neighborhood, on the most casually affluent suburban campus, don't we find lots of eager minds and high aspirations once we seriously begin to look for and to nurture them? Let us reconsider our customary resistance to hearing about great things going on somewhere else and open up to the possibilities that surround us.

The point about the images in this collage is that *they also are part of the reality of school*, even schools that operate under deprived conditions. Of course they are not found everywhere in schools present or past. Of course they demand a level of energy and commitment very hard to sustain. And of course such positive examples shine all the more brightly against the background of generalized apathy and business-as-usual.

It is also unquestionably true that the combined effects of a heavy teaching load, insufficient planning time, increased non-teaching responsibilities, lack of collegiality, poor recognition of success, and the demands that needy students place upon teachers' energies and emotions—the whole list of afflictions this chapter began with—sap our vitality and hinder us from looking for, nurturing, and appreciating what these images suggest. Teachers simply cannot go on blaming themselves, or accepting censure, for trying to be “good enough” workers in a demoralized or dysfunctional system.

But these positive images and others like them offer hope that learning need not always be held hostage to the game, that there is nothing predestined or natural about the lack of intensity in most classrooms. Teachers must find ways to harness

that hope and make it work for them, their students, and their colleagues.

The Game of School is very pervasive, and its rituals are deeply entrenched in the actions and expectations of students and teachers. But it is not immutable. It can and must be changed.